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ABSTRACT

This document is a report of a 1971 planning conference for the National Institute of Education planning unit. Three major themes were developed. The first theme indicated the need for the formation of teacher centers to meet the needs of teachers, suggest new options, couple teachers with available resources, and in doing so reinforce the notion that to be teaching one must also be learning. Emphasis was placed on the availability of resources to document the art of the craftsman and quality in education while sharpening an understanding of the art, improving the ability to communicate it, and gaining insight into the learning process as it occurs under the guidance of the craftsman. The development of a coupling between research and the classroom craftsman's intuitive use of his art is also stressed. (MJM)

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CLASSROOM CRAFTSMEN

Report of a Planning Conference
for the NIE Planning Unit

November 19-20, 1971

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Planning Unit

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CLASSROOM CRAFTSMEN

Classroom Craftsmen are concerned that education affect and not afflict all who are involved in the process. This by necessity requires diversity and is reflected in a concern that the structure of the National Institute of Education allow for diversity and that it be designed with the flexibility to attack present needs without becoming another structure that generates its own needs. NIE must establish mechanisms that can respond to needs as they change without expending its energies designing and meeting self-generated needs. It must also supply a forum where various groups can meet and talk freely with a minimum of the territorial imperative.

Who is responsible for the learning situation–defining its needs, bringing resources to bear on them, and controlling the quality of education? An examination of these issues might provide new insight into the settings for quality education. In current practice it would seem that the adult, the teacher, has more control over the quality of education than the structure of the school, the materials, the curriculum, or what is explicitly known about learning or instruction. Yet in defining the needs of education, controlling the resources, or defining quality, the teachers all too often are the last to be consulted. Note the absence of any elementary classroom craftsmen from the list of individuals in Appendix C of the Levien Report.

In many cases, needs are determined by administrators, custodians, or available Federal funds. Decisions are made at a level that is unaware of the day-to-day operation of the classroom or the attitudes of the teacher toward the learning situation. These needs are accompanied by endless red-tape, the rationale of which is lost in antiquity or seems trivial to the craftsman in the classroom. Curriculum and testing are imposed on classroom structure with little regard for the individual teacher's judgment or operational needs. The introduction of new curriculum and the administering of standardized tests are often justified as improving or measuring the quality of education when in fact they produce stress within the classroom while the results add little if anything to meeting the needs of learners or measuring the quality of their education. Teachers lack control over the learning environment in order to accommodate security of organization and personnel. The classroom craftsman's limited physical and emotional energy is often expended meeting externally imposed needs rather than the needs of students. In such a climate it should come as no great surprise that many teachers simply add their own needs to those externally imposed rather than focusing their efforts on the needs of children. Shouldn't a mechanism be formulated that will meet teachers' needs as a system of quality education would have teachers meet students' needs?

Classroom craftsmen who have specific needs should have access to some resource that can help focus on these needs. To have immediate impact this resource must be spawned and grow as close to the classroom as possible. To have long range viability the resource must function primarily as a service to craftsmen who have specific requests while at the same time resisting the generation of its own set of needs to be passed on to teachers. Craftsmen have a real desire to have access to human resources, yet the usual operating premise has been that packages can be prepared to meet needs. These packages usually require considerable adaptation. Adaptation, however, is more expensive than adoption, which adds new demands instead of meeting old ones. The notion of a resource that supplies pre-packaged solutions to needs will not solve the problem. Human resources must provide help in a way that is meaningful to the teacher: sometimes answers, sometimes information.

The development of "Teacher Centers" currently under consideration may supply the necessary organizer for resources directly available to classroom craftsmen. In designing the structure of these centers, it is crucial that they be set up primarily to meet needs brought to them, to provide a service to classroom practitioners without imposing their own needs. These centers may have a small staff and draw upon persons in classrooms at all levels or the community at large to meet the challenges presented. This implies a budget that allows the purchase of human resources when and where needed rather than a large commitment to full-time personnel. We strongly recommend that such centers be established and controlled so that no growth occurs in middle management or administration which is not involved in meeting the service function. The establishment of "Teacher Centers" does not attempt to look within the existing structure for answers to the questions raised in the second paragraph above. However, much of the conventional wisdom about these

issues might be examined as various centers prove effective or ineffective, judged by their ability to attract teachers with needs and provide help in meeting these needs.

Most classroom craftsmen consider working in learning situations as in part an art form. As with all art forms, these situations may defy specification or duplication with the same spark that makes a master out of one user while for others it yields mediocrity. A study of the masters in any art form can help in developing one's own style, but the dangers of mimicry should be recognized. The classroom craftsman is a master of his art and supplies a quality education. This is stated without an attempt to develop a description of "quality education" or "classroom craftsmen;" any observer will recognize some learning experiences that are more appealing to him than others and assign them a higher quality rating. Even with good things happening we fail to identify or capitalize on them. This may stem in part from our inability to select or communicate the necessary parameters to be described. The Teacher Centers may aid in the identification of craftsmen and exceptional learning situations. NIE could establish a mechanism, in the form of funds or special services available to local teaching centers, by which these individuals and situations and the process by which they came into being could be documented. Since the dysfunctions of craftsmen or quality education are at present highly subjective, the documentation effort could also be used to bring a large range of skills to bear on the problem with the goal of sharpening the descriptions, identifying important parameters, and gaining insight into possible areas of research in learning and instruction. The teams working to document the state of the craftsman's art should include as wide a range of skills as possible. They might include other craftsmen from education, psychology, sociology and anthropology. The resulting definitions, descriptions, and insights must then be communicated to the profession. A mechanism for communication must be built that can do more than elicit a "That's nice" response or provide an oversimplification of what has happened that is of little use to the practitioner. These research teams might well concentrate on naturalistic observation and the gathering of data as well as sharing their skills with the classroom craftsman. They come not just to gather data, but as sources of information and learners looking for new insights. A case could also be made for documenting situations where the learning situation breaks down, not as bad examples but as tests for insights being developed about successful situations. Since any course of action has side effects, the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses of various styles may provide as much useful information as attempts to search for a limited number of parameters that control a multifaceted outcome.

Where does research fit into the operation of the classroom craftsman? The craftsman desires a better understanding of existing options and the acquisition of more options to draw upon. Many educational strategies have a base in theory, but it is a safe guess that, as in any craft, the craftsman's art is ahead of theory. The research thrust could be built from the needs expressed by craftsmen as well as insights gained in documenting the existing state of the art. Teacher Centers could function to bring craftsmen and skilled researchers together, while simultaneously supplying the researcher with the conventional wisdom of the practitioner. Attempts to document the classroom craftsman's art should also yield insight into areas of learning theory and instructional design that could be followed up with research. Once again the impetus comes from the state of the art and the birth and growth should remain as close to classrooms as possible. The classroom craftsman is starved for outside stimulation, additional skills, a way to communicate successes and failures, and in many ways he is already deeply involved in research. He is constantly involved in identifying problems, trying to establish cause and effect, and testing various solutions, using the current conventional wisdom or knowledge of theory. He is doing it every day, under fire, and with little time to analyze or write reports. How much could be gained by coupling this effort and skill with the skills other experts could bring to use and share?

The comments thus far have focused dimly on only three frameworks: the formation of Teacher Centers to meet needs of teachers, suggest new options, couple teachers with available resources, and in so doing reinforce the notion that to be teaching one must also be learning; making available resources to document the art of the craftsman and quality in education while sharpening our understanding of the art, improving our ability to communicate it, and gaining insight into the learning process as it occurs under the guidance of a craftsman; and the development of a coupling between research and the classroom craftsman's intuitive use of his art. No mention has been made of the structure of schools or the options that might be available to students, parents, teachers and administrators. Schools

within schools, multi-age grouping, evaluation, laws which may impede rather than encourage diversity, teacher training, credentials, and mobility of both teachers and students are items that were mentioned during our discussion and with which it is hoped NIE can deal, allowing flexibility and encouraging diversity. No attempt has been made to list all of the current tenets raised at the conference that serve to limit diversity, such as the importance of precise programs to teach the 3 R's or they won't be there; reading is important, therefore a sequential program is necessary to produce the desired skills; and children start school in September. This list should be expanded and data gathered to determine the effects and side effects of these ideas. Concern was also expressed over the current state of evaluation. Craftsmen need to specify the kinds of evaluation that would be useful as optional tools to determine where a child is and why, rather than to place such heavy emphasis on comparing him to the national norm.

At the close of the discussion it was suggested that the finished teacher is finished. So it will be with NIE. NIE must have a structure that encourages diversity and places a high priority on meeting diverse needs generated outside the structure. The National Institute of Education must be able to speak from knowledge of today's practice, with tomorrow's possibilities in perspective.